A woman's face is shown in profile, looking to the right. The image is overlaid with several vertical bars of varying widths and colors, including teal, light blue, and grey, which partially obscure her features. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic.

The
**NASHVILLE
NUMBER
SYSTEM**

for singers

BY kira small

WHAT IS IT? (AND WHY USE IT?)

You may have heard of the Nashville Number System, which is a system of notation that uses numbers instead of lettered chord symbols that's employed on 95% of the recording sessions that happen in Nashville.

One of the primary reasons numbers are used here is ease of transpose-ability (not to “accommodate moody singers” like one guy said. #jerk).

Players can use the same chart for a song regardless of the key.

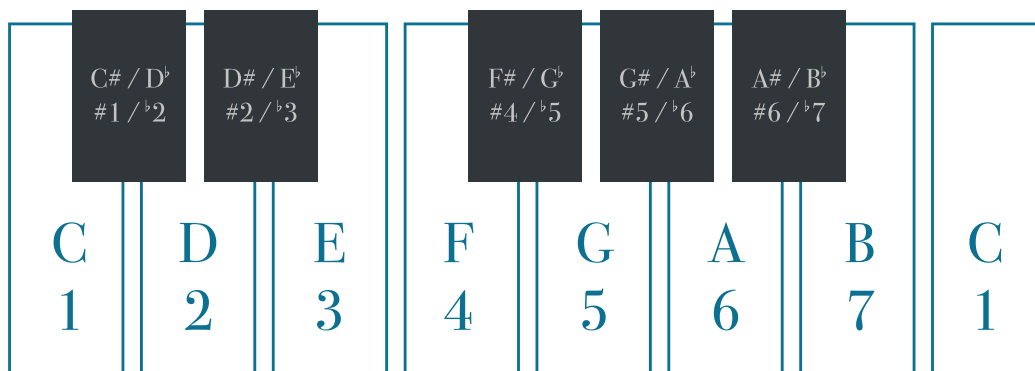
For singers, there are many similar applications as well. Demo singers get rough work versions of songs (in whatever key was comfortable for the writer), use numbers to quickly notate the melody, THEN give our key to the producer so they can track it where it works for our voice.



Another advantage to numbers is you can notate things on the fly without an instrument for pitch reference. I don't have perfect pitch, but if you show me where 1 is and then say you need me on the 3 (or 5, or b7 or #4 – try me) I can hit it blindfolded from 50 paces, whether we're in C, G or W.

Here's how the numbers work, using key of C as example:

Note in Scale	Nashville Number
C	1
C# D ^b	#1 or 1# 2 ^b or 2 ^b
D	2
D# E ^b	#2 or 2# 3 ^b or 3 ^b
E	3
F	4
F# G ^b	#4 or 4# 5 ^b or 5 ^b
G	5
G# A ^b	#5 or 5# 6 ^b or 6 ^b
A	6
A# B ^b	#6 or 6# 7 ^b or 7 ^b
B	7

Obviously C# and Db are the same note, as are all the other enharmonic spellings here. Some of these will get used equally, depending on chord context, but some are almost always written a certain way. (You're far more likely to see/write b7 than #6, for example.) But write whatever will have you land on the right note when you see it. As for whether the accidental goes in front of the number or in back – totally a matter of preference/habit.



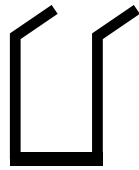


LIST of SYMBOLS

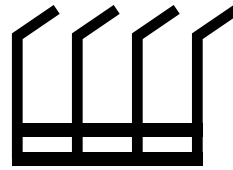
Here is a list of some other things you might see on a Nashville vocal chart. Some are taken straight from traditional music notation, some from the Nashville Number System. Some have just sort of evolved on their own and spread through the hive mind. A few I probably made up.



Quarter Note



Eighth Notes



Sixteenth Notes



Half Note



Dotted Half Note
 $1/2 + 1/4 = 3$ beats in $\frac{4}{4}$ time



Dotted Quarter Note
 $1/4 + 1/8 = 1 \frac{1}{2}$ beats in $\frac{4}{4}$ time



Quarter Rest



Half Rest



Eighth Rest



Sixteenth Rest



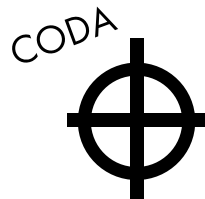
Whole Rest



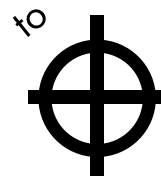
"Sign"
Come back here when the chart says so :)

d.s.

Go back to Sign
d.s. al coda means "go back to coda"



Coda
Go here when chart says so



Coda
Go to "coda"

sim

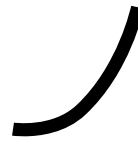
Simile
Same as preceding

-1

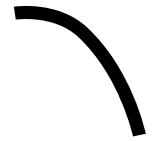
Cut off
Cut off on beat 1



Slide Up



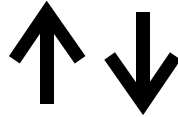
Scoop Up



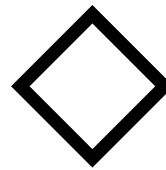
Fall Off



Trill
Either fast on one word, or
a slower "wiggle"
between notes.
(See: Re-re-re in Respect BGV's)



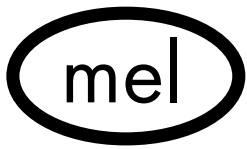
Arrows
I use arrows sometimes to
notate what octave I'm in,
especially if I've been in a
different range for a few
phrases.



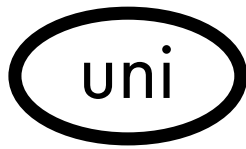
Hold until Cue



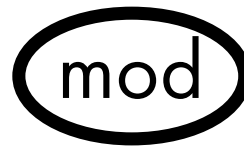
Fermata
Hold until cue



Melody
Helps to know so I don't
mistakenly scramble for a
harmony part



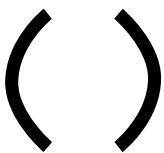
Unison
Unison part, so I don't
scramble for a harmony
part



Modulate
Modulate up or down.
Note whether it's a 1/2
step, whole step, etc.



Break
Break in phrasing



Parenthesis
I put parenthesis around
words that are kind of
swallowed or half-sung



Push/Anticipate
Usually 1/8th note push.
Like a tied note from
traditional notation.



Push/Anticipate
Usually 1/8th note push.
This is a Nashville Number
System notation.



Breathe
Especially important in group
settings.

Mary had a...

Underlining

Underlined lyrics often indicate downbeats

[: :]

Repeat Signs

Repeat whatever's between these two signs

[4x]

Sing 4x's

Sing the indicated number of times. Sometimes used with repeat signs, sometimes not.

[- 4 -]

of Bars

Tacet for indicated number of bars. 4 in this case.

1. ——— :||

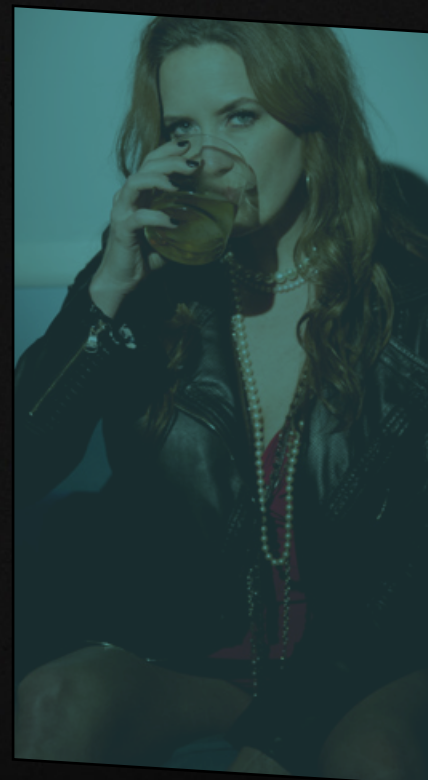
First Ending

Do this the first time through

2. ——— :||

Second Ending

Do this the second time through



REAL WORLD EXAMPLES

Right - let's see some of that in context. Let's say, for example, that I got hired to do a sound-alike* of "Respect" by Aretha Franklin. (*try to copy as close to original as possible – it's a thing) Here's an example of how I'd chart out the lead:

1—4—1

RESPECT

↑ b3 1 6 3' 1 b7
What you want / baby I got it

b3 2 2 3' b7 1 b7 1
What you need / do you know I got it

b3 2 1 6 / All I'm askin' /

b7 1 6 5 1
(is) for a little Respect when you come home

1 5 6 1 / 1 b7 1 ~b7 1 6
Hey baby / when you come home / mister

And here are some of the background parts:

RESPECT – bgv's

Intro [- 4 -]

v1 [: Hoo } Hoo :] (3x)

7 6
5 4

b7 6 b7 6 5 6 5 b7
5 4 5 4 b3 4 b3 5

ch1 [: } Just a little bit } Just a little bit :] (2x)

b7 6 b7 6 5 6 5 b7
5 4 5 4 b3 4 b3 5

v2 [- 3 -] Hoo } Hoo Hoo

6 7 6
4 5 4

ch2 [: } Just a little bit } Just a little bit :] } Just a little bit

b7 6 b7 6 5 6 5 b7 6 5 6 5 6
5 4 5 4 b3 4 b3 5 4 b3 4 b3 4

v3 [- 6 -]

ch3 Just a, just a, just a, just a Just a, just a, just a, just a

b7 6 b7 6 b7 6 b7 5 6 5 6 5 6 5 6 5
5 #4 5 #4 5 #4 5 b3 4 b3 4 b3 4 b3 4 b3

b7 6 b7 6 5 6 5 b7
5 4 5 4 b3 4 b3 5

} Just a little bit } Just a little bit

Solo [- 8 -]

v4 [- 1 -] ⁶₄ Hoo ⁷₅ [: Hoo ⁶₄ Hoo :] (2x)

Handwritten notes: A bracket under the first 'Hoo' with an arrow pointing left. A wavy line under the second 'Hoo' with an arrow pointing right.

ch4 ^{b7}₅ Re-re-re-re ⁶₄ Re-re-re-re ^{b7}₅ -spect, ^{b7 6 b7}_{5 4 5} Just a little bit, ^{6 5 6 5 6}_{4 b3 4 b3 4} Just a little bit

Handwritten notes: Wavy lines above the first three 'Re-re-re-re' groups. A bracket under the '-spect,' group. A bracket under the 'Just a little bit' group.

Breakdown [- 4 -]

out choruses ^{b7}₅ Sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me

Handwritten notes: A bracket under the 'Sock' word with an arrow pointing right. A wavy line under the rest of the phrase.

⁶₄ Sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me

^{b7}₅ [: } Just a little bit | } Just a little bit :] (3x)

^{b7}₅ Re-re-re-re Re-re-re-re -spect, Just a little bit, Just a little bit

Just a little bit Just a little bit

MAJOR vs MINOR

I've seen people get into fights over this, which is weird, but whatever.

There isn't an "official right way" to do it. Some people use the minor as the tonic and chart that way (song in G minor, G = 1) and others use the relative major instead (song in G minor, Bb is relative major, G = 6). I've used both, depending on how the song feels and what my ear tells me. I usually make a note to myself about how I charted it ("min = 1" or "rel maj") so I don't end up all sorts of wrong when I come back to it later. Do whatever works for your ear, just make sure that if you're working with other singers, you're all on the same page. Here's an example using a familiar minor tune:

What Child Is This?

Words by William Chatterton Dix
Traditional melody (Greensleeves)

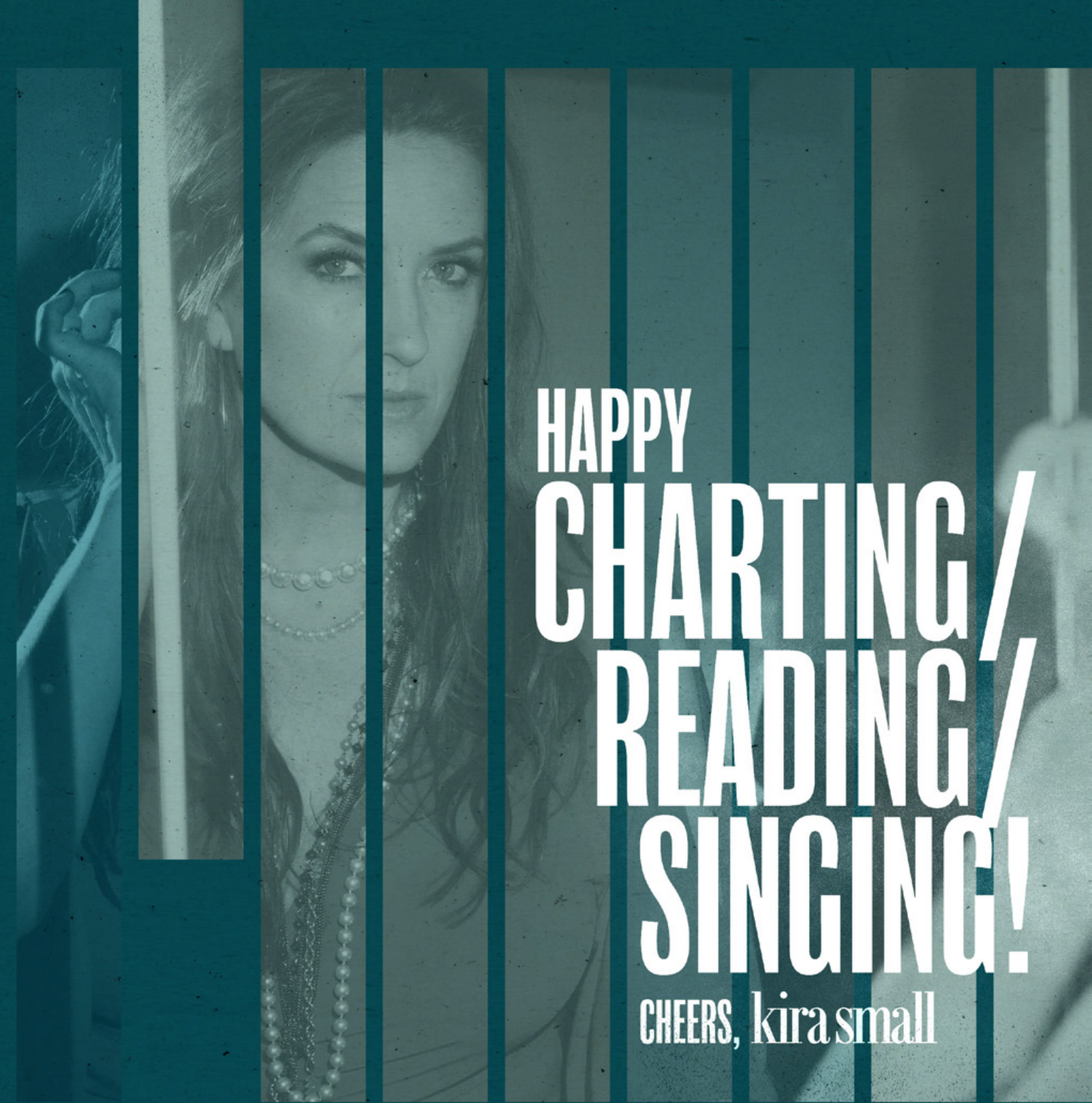
What child is this... who laid to rest... On Ma - ry's lap... is sleep - ing? Whom

What Child Is This?

Words by William Chatterton Dix
Traditional melody (Greensleeves)

What child is this... who laid to rest... On Ma - ry's lap... is sleep - ing? Whom

Sometimes if I'm in a minor key I'll just assume all the 3rds are minor unless noted and I won't bother to flat them. But usually I do just to be safe. Again – do what works for you. If someone else wrote the chart, clarify whatever you need to before you launch into the tune.



HAPPY
CHARTING/
READING/
SINGING!

CHEERS, kira small

Looking for more resources
on *MUSIC MASTERY?*

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